JADARA

Volume 27 | Number 4 Article 8

October 2019

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POINT OF VIEW

THOUGHTS ABOUT ASL VERSUS ENGLISH FROM AN OLD TEACHER

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Editor's Comment

This section provides a forum for exchange of reasoned ideas on all sides of issues in the area of deafness. The opinions expressed in this article, and others that appear in *Point of View*, are those of the authors and should not be considered the position of ADARA or the editors of JADARA. The editors welcome responses to the opinions expressed in this section.

We have all been exposed, now, for a considerable length of time to the "new controversy" in the field of education for deaf children, that of whether to use American Sign Language or so-called Total Communication ("signing in English") in the classroom with deaf children. Unfortunately, the controversy appears to be dichotomous–one has to choose which side one will be on. The two sides seem to be English and American Sign Language. Personally, I am of the opinion that there is no reason for an argument. Aside from the smoke screen which has been thrown up (that the "natural" language of deaf children is ASL), there doesn't seem to be a reasonable basis for the argument. If this is true, then the argument that English should be taught as a second language also falls by the wayside. This is not to say that ASL should be denied deaf children. Quite the opposite is true, I believe.

Before getting to the meat of my argument, I would like to take a quick look at the "ASL is the natural language for deaf children" argument.

Except that language somehow evolved, and there is no historical certitude with regard to how that happened, there simply is no such thing as a "natural" language for anyone. If there were a natural language for the human being, it seems logical to assume that there would then be but one language, a universal language. We can see how absurd such an argument is when we deal with spoken languages. We know for a fact that a language is learned. It may not be formally taught, but it is learned through the meaningful environmental experiences we have during our early years. Further, this learned language is the language we refer to as our "native" language. Anyone's native language has to be learned. It isn't taught, *per se*, but it is learned.

Why do I speak English? Because, as a baby and during my preschool years, the oral language environment was English and it was a meaningful environment because I had normal hearing and at least a modicum of intellectual capability. (It really doesn't require too much intelligence in order to gain oral language competency so long as the hearing capabilities are normal in all the important regards.) Why does anyone speak any language as the native language? For the same reason. In other words, the native language I have is simply due to an accident of birth and not to any innate

characteristic(s) I may possess. Too, it is a "native" language as opposed to a "natural" language. It is "natural" that I speak my "native" language because of environmental circumstances and not because of an innateness of the language I speak.

Is the child who is born deaf in any different circumstance from me with regard for potential for learning a language? Basically, the answer is that the deaf child is not. However, the modality in which the language must be environmentally expressed must be one which the deaf child may take advantage of–one which makes language accessible to the child. In other words, the modality must be a visual modality. (And for the child who is both deaf and blind, the modality must be one the child may experience tactilely.)

Some deaf children are able to learn their language through speechreading, so relatively few adjustments tend to be necessary for those children. The vast majority of children who are born deaf, however, appear to be unable to learn the language present in the environment through oral means, so a major adjustment is necessary. The major adjustment is commonly agreed to be a shift from an oral to a manual/visual modality. This is where the controversy of ASL versus English seems to commence.

In my considerable number of years in the field, there is one thing which always strikes home to me when people talk about communication and language when speaking about deaf children and the problems with which the children are confronted. The vast majority of people who work with deaf children and who sign will say that they use sign language. Every student I have ever had in college who had learned some manual communication (including some who seemed to have acquired a relatively high degree of skill) have told me, when I asked, that they had learned sign language at some place or other. Not one single student told me that they could converse with a deaf person in ASL. The students could sign, but they could not speak (sign) in American Sign Language. It always required several explanations and discussions before the students even began to understand that ASL is a separate and distinct language from English and that what they were doing was using the lexicon of ASL to express themselves in English.

There are still a lot of professionals, teachers, administrators, and others, who have, at best, only the foggiest notion about the difference between signing and sign language. This inability to understand the distinction is, to my mind, one of the major stumbling blocks we have in attempting to deal with the problem in an objective manner which will, ultimately, be to the benefit of deaf children (who, incidentally, almost always become deaf adults).

Once the difference is understood about the differences between English and American Sign Language, most normally-hearing (as opposed to deaf) teachers would probably argue that deaf children must learn English in order to take advantage of educational opportunities and that they (the normally-hearing teachers), therefore, "use Total Communication" in their classrooms. Unfortunately for the children, they (the children) seldom get exposed to English in a modality from which they may reasonably profit. That is, the teachers might orally produce complete English utterances, but their manual renditions are, for by far the most part, extremely incomplete. Thus, the children may be in an environment which professes to be an English one, but from which they may be able to learn very little English because English is inaccessible by reason of inadequate manual rendition.

On the other hand, we have a very militant-seeming advocacy group which claims that ASL is the "natural language" of deaf children. If this were true, all deaf children throughout the world would be born with a complete language system fully developed, that system being, of course, ASL. It just isn't so. It isn't so for the children in other lands and it isn't so for the deaf children born in

this country. They all still have to go through the process of learning the language, whatever it may be.

However, which group is right, basically, about which language should be the language for deaf children? Are the ASL militants right in making the claim that ASL should be the 'first language' of deaf children? Or are the educators right in claiming that English is the most important element in a deaf child's education? Maybe they are both right.

There is much to be said for ASL on a cultural basis. It seems to be a language which is highly efficient and comfortable for deaf persons to use in their daily communication. There is a beauty to the language which cannot be captured by an oral language. There is poetry which is unique to the language. It provides a common bond for persons who cannot rely on an oral means of communication for interaction with others. It also may very well enhance one's self image.

There is also much to be said for English. Education in many subject matter areas depends upon the ability to understand and use English. There are fields in which it is not possible to achieve without the ability to manage English. One simply cannot read and enjoy or learn from the (English) printed word unless one can manage English to a sufficient degree. Never mind the fact that it is also the most common language in our nation and the language of commerce throughout the world. Competency in English may also help instill a feeling of confidence.

So, then, which is the "right language" to instill in deaf children? Which language should we choose? Properly, in my view, the choice should be for both.

To iterate a point mentioned above, the language environment should be one which is meaningful to the person who must extract meaning form it. It follows that the environment should not have two competing languages ongoing if the child is to be able to develop competency in whatever language we wish for him to develop. Therefore, and now I am getting to the discussion I wish to broach, it seems obvious that ONLY ONE language should be used in ANY ONE environment in which language learning is expected to occur, which also means that all of the adult "language models" must use the language in the environment and in a modality which makes the language accessible to the child.

Thus, in an environment (most likely the school building) where English is the language to be used and developed, everybody must use the language in the appropriate modality(ies). In this case, this should mean that everyone uses English orally, insofar as is possible, and in a manual modality, the same manual modality. In an environment (most likely the dormitories, etc.) where ASL is the language to be used and developed, everybody must use ASL. Since ASL has no oral modality component, this obviates the need to render it orally.

There are a few problems which are bound to crop up in both environments. The problem in the English environment would be, and is, the fact that virtually nobody signs/spells everything they speak orally. In fact, many people only render manually 50% to 75% of what they render orally. Some render even less. This being the case, 25% to 50% of the English in the environment is most likely inaccessible to the deaf children in the environment. It is virtually impossible to acquire language competence when up to half of the language stimulus is not received by the child expected to learn the language. (For the English environment, I know of virtually no programs which could serve as models. I have heard that there are some programs using one of the Manual English systems such as SEE I or SEE II which have had a high degree of success in instilling English competence in the children. I would suspect, then, that virtually everybody is serving as an excellent model and that there is a high degree of consistency among the adult 'models.' There is a

problem beyond this one of which I will speak later.)

The problem in the ASL environment would be the dearth of available models. Very few normally-hearing people who were not raised in an ASL-rich environment ever acquire even a modicum of competence in expressing ASL and even less competence in understanding ASL. The problem for such an environment, then, would appear to be, simply, one of the lack of available manpower (adult models).

For the sake of argument, let's assume that a residential school were to be organized around the notion I remarked upon earlier; the school building environment will be an English one, and outside the school building the environment will be an ASL environment. Let us further assume that everybody in the ASL environment has both expressive and receptive competence in ASL and that everyone in the English environment has competence in English, knows how to sign, and is committed to signing everything that is spoken. There still may very well be a severe problem based upon the fact that a common lexicon will be used for both languages.

A parallel here might be a residential school program for normally-hearing children who are in an oral English school building environment, and an oral French environment outside the school building, but that the common lexicon is the French one. I think one could readily see how unsuccessful such a program would be in terms of the children acquiring any degree of competence in English. Obviously, the children might be expected to develop reasonable competence in French, but when they tried to speak in English, it is doubtful that anyone whose native language is English would be able to understand them. In fact, it is doubtful whether anyone who spoke both French and English would be able to understand very clearly what they were saying when they were trying to speak English. I agree, this is ridiculous, but I think this is very much a parallel to what goes on in our schools for deaf children.

When we sign in English syntax, we actually borrow the signs we use from ASL. In other words, we use the lexicon of one language (ASL) in an attempt to speak (sign) a different language (English). Maybe, just maybe, this is one reason we are still experiencing relative failure in our schools with regard to their success in instilling in the children a reasonable level of English competence. Maybe the children are in a constant state of confusion because they are actually being exposed to two different syntaxes and grammars, but only one lexicon. Consequently, because there is an insufficient basis for differentiation, it is hardly likely that most deaf children in the residential school systems will acquire English competence.

It should be our responsibility as professionals concerned with the educational success of deaf children, to determine whether what I have said is true and, if so, to determine the means to overcome the problem. I have been concerned about the matter for a long, long time. I am not a linguist, far from it, but I have wondered why deaf children don't do better in gaining competence in English, and so I have tried to arrive at an explanation on a logical basis. As a result, after I first arrived at the conclusion that we really cannot, basically, teach English competence in the classroom as we have been trying to do for so many years, I thought that the problem was that teachers and others in the school environment were simply not signing/spelling everything they speak.

A part of the basis for this reasoning was the news that a number of programs were being successful in instilling English competence in the children who were in a particular program. However, it also seemed to be true that everybody signed/spelled in strict accordance with the requirements set up for the system being used,

which was one of the Manual English systems. This meant, apparently, that ASL was not a significant factor. One language; one syntax; one grammar; one lexicon. This seemed to be the difference.

The difference, then, between such programs where ASL was not a significant factor and programs where it was, is that the successful programs deal with English only (ASL is not a significant factor) while the other programs are attempting to focus on English while ASL is a significant factor and the lexicon is common to the two languages.

The problem, if a common lexicon is the problem, could be resolved if a different, clearly different, lexicon were used in the English environment. In the auditory world, there are clear differences between and amongst languages. It is relatively easy to recognize one language as distinct from another on the basis of their sounds. We cannot parallel this feature in manual languages. A sign is a sign is a sign, etc. Therefore, the only viable alternative would seem to be to restrict the use of signs (with some fingerspelling) to ASL while limiting English to the use of fingerspelling, at least during the formative years, say up to the age of about 10 or 12 or 14.

This would require several radical departures, not the least being a change of attitude on the part of the adults in the English-only environment! Arguments against using fingerspelling as the mode for English expression, at least by the adults, tend to focus on adult concerns and not upon child concerns. For example, a common argument is that fingerspelling is too taxing visually. It may very well be too taxing for an adult who has not had the early-year experience of a fingerspelling environment. But, is the same thing true about young children? I think you would have to agree that children are marvelously adaptable and flexible. So much so, that they would probably be able to adapt, generally, in a situation which we adults find intolerable.

There are other arguments which are brought up in an effort to discourage or discredit the use of fingerspelling. The fact seems to be, if we dig below the surface, that most normally-hearing adults prefer signing because, as a TV commercial I have seen for "sign language" teaching videotapes claims, "It's fun!" As teachers, as professionals who are supposed to be in a business which is supposed to be designed to be responsive to and benefit deaf children, "fun" is not a criterion for consideration of modality. Whether it is easier for us to sign is not a pertinent issue. Whether what we do will benefit deaf children and, ultimately, the human condition for deaf people in our society is pertinent.

I can understand and do appreciate the current striving toward self-direction, self-control, self-determination, or whatever terms are relevant for the "Deaf Pride" phenomenon. To be sure, much good has resulted from the efforts of the deaf community in behalf of the deaf community. So far, the only voices we have heard are the voices of deaf persons who are articulate in English. The loudest voices we hear arguing for ASL only environments in schools (at least during the earlier years) are those belonging to deaf persons who have a very high degree of competence in English. Because they command the language, are they also the prime determiners of what language others will be allowed to have access to? In our society, language (English) is power. Power can be abused. Would it really be in the best interest of deaf children to be allowed to be in an environment in which only one language, ASL, is permitted? Will these children be able to learn English if they must wait until they are 10 or 12 years old before they begin? Would they be able to gain education beyond their high school years in places other than NTID or Gallaudet? Would they have to be dependent upon interpreters for nearly all their interactions with the English-speaking community for the rest of their lives? If ASL were the only language in

their early educational environments, when would they ever learn to read and write? (Remember, ASL does not have a written component.)

Assuming the ASL-only proponents were to have their way, where would the teachers come from? It is highly unlikely that the vast majority of teachers currently teaching would ever be able to acquire a suitable command of ASL expressively or, in my estimation more importantly, receptively. How is one to convince parents that they must learn a new and strange form of communication and a new language if they are to be able to be parents to their child who is deaf – fully parents to the child? What are the prospects for success for parents to learn ASL? Regardless of how positively we may view the condition of deafness, parents are almost always traumatized when it occurs in their children and view it as a handicap. Accepting the child as the child is AND having to learn ASL may be too much for too many parents to be able to handle. The result, most likely, will not be an environment which will enhance the child's development.

The bottom line, probably, is that there may be no easy solution. The solutions which we may contemplate may not be palatable for us adults. Whether to pursue an avenue which promises to be of significant benefit to deaf children, however, should not be dependent upon what is "comfortable" or "fun" or "easier" or "less taxing" or whatever for us adults. Whether to pursue an avenue which promises to be of significant benefit to deaf children should only be dependent upon the likelihood that it may be of benefit to deaf children, and if it is difficult or uncomfortable for us to institute such procedures, so be it.